



# The Orphans' Stories

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## Robbie Waisman

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### I. Skarszysko, Poland

I was born in 1931 in Skarszysko, Poland, a very tight-knit community. I was the youngest of six children, with four older brothers and one sister. My father was a tailor and my mother looked after us all. There was a lot of love in our family. As the baby in the family, I was very pampered and felt that everything revolved around me. My parents were religious. I remember the Sabbath as a very special time, when my father would tell us Sholom Aleichem stories, like "Fiddler on the Roof." My only regret is that I do not have any photographs of my family. I am always envious of people who have pictures of their parents.



My first experience with anti-Semitism occurred when I was 6 years old. My two best friends were a brother and sister, Wiesiek and Halinka. We were inseparable. We had sleepovers at each other's homes. I remember how delighted I was to help decorate their Christmas tree. They, in turn, loved the special food my mother cooked at Rosh Hashanah (Jewish new year). That all changed just before the Easter break. I was on my way home from school when, suddenly, a group of children cornered me and started beating me up. With every punch and kick I heard them say, "This is for the murder of our Lord Jesus Christ." Wiesiek and Halinka, my very best friends, led the attack. I remember how angry I felt on the way home from the hospital. I kept asking my parents, "Why?" I lost a wonderful friendship that day. I lost my innocence, and life was never the same after that.

After Hitler's rise to power, I remember my parents' discussions. They were frightened and could not believe the situation that was developing around us. After Kristallnacht, German-Jews started coming into Poland. They came to our house to ask my father for advice, to talk things over. They expressed their fears, but my father believed that Germany was the epitome of civilization and was not capable of atrocities.

## II. During the Holocaust

I was eight years old in 1939 when my city was bombed and occupied by the Nazis. I thought that it was a game until I saw a man shot to death. I matured forty years in that instant.

Then the round-ups started. Soldiers with bayonets and guns would push Jews onto trucks. Some of the Jews came back after the day's work, some didn't. At the next round-up, some people started to run away. People were getting frantic.

Hasag, a German munitions factory, was established in our town and the Jews were forced to work there. My father had to close his tailor shop and work in the munitions factory, along with my sister and brothers.

In 1940, the ghetto was formed in Skarszysko and my parents sent me to stay with a non-Jewish family on a farm. I ran away after about a month. I had to walk for hours. When I got back to Skarszysko, I had to smuggle myself into the ghetto through a hole in the wall. When I arrived, my mother hugged me and kissed me but my father took off his belt and spanked me. That was the first and last spanking I ever had.

Running away from the farm that day saved my life. Shortly afterwards the SS proclaimed that anyone harbouring a Jewish child should give up the child to the police in return for a sack of flour or sugar. I know that many children survived in hiding elsewhere, but in Skarszysko, to my knowledge, none did. They were all denounced.

In 1941, my eldest brother, Chaim heard that the ghetto was going to be liquidated. That night he smuggled me out. I kissed my mother goodbye. The next day, everyone in the ghetto was sent to Treblinka and gassed. My mother was among them.

Chaim had a privileged job of driving a truck in and out of the ghetto. He drove me to an abandoned farm and hid me in a haystack in an abandoned barn and told me that he would come back for me. I waited two days, then three days, and I became very worried. Finally, he came back and smuggled me into the work camp where my father and brother Abram were working. My job was to stamp ammunition shells with the initials 'FES'. I was very fast and I had no problem doing 3,200 shells a day.

In the mornings, when we lined up to be counted, Abram would pinch my cheeks to make me look healthier. At the end of the shift, we slept in barracks. There were no mattresses, just some straw. We slept in our clothes; we couldn't change. The lice were horrendous. Typhoid fever broke out and Abram came down with it.

There were no medications to give him. We just hid him and gave him water. If you asked for medical attention, they'd take you and shoot you. I looked after him during the day, and my father would look after him at night. One day, he was discovered and they took him away and shot him. My father was never the same after this. His black hair turned grey.

At this point my father and I were separated and I contracted typhoid fever. I didn't think I'd make it. I was alone, but somebody kept me alive. Somebody covered me with straw and gave me water. I tried to go back to work but I was weak and I stumbled. As the SS were taking me away to be shot, I was saved by an SS man who knew me. I slowly regained my health and went back to work.

I met Abe Chapnick, a boy a year older than me, and we remained together for the rest of the war. In 1944, when I was 13, Abe and I were sent to Buchenwald Concentration Camp and placed in Block 8 with Polish, French and German political prisoners. These prisoners helped protect us. There were very few Jews. My life in Buchenwald was actually easier than in the other camps. The political prisoners hid us during the day while they went to work. Sometimes we even received care parcels from the Red Cross. Once we found ourselves with a piece of chocolate. We weren't even sure what it was at first.

### III. Rediscovering Freedom

I was fourteen years old when I was liberated from Buchenwald on April 11, 1945. Suddenly a hush came over the camp and the shelling stopped. Our barrack was close to the main gate and I saw soldiers in different uniforms entering the camp. Prisoners came running out from everywhere. I ran out after a jeep and I saw some black American soldiers. I went up to one of them and I touched him. His name was Leon Bass. Years later, in 1983, I saw a picture of Leon in a magazine and tracked him down. We were reunited and have remained friends ever since.

Among the camp inmates there were leaders who gathered up all the children and began to take charge of us. I had no idea that there were 430 children scattered throughout Buchenwald. I had thought that Abe and I were the only children there. We were taken to live in the former SS barracks. We each had a bed and clean sheets. I remember being examined by many doctors and nurses and the Red Cross taking down our stories.

My immediate concern was to be reunited with my family. At that time I was not yet aware of the enormity of the Holocaust. The human mind doesn't accept some of these things. I knew that my brother, Abram, had died and I suspected my father was also dead, but I still hoped to find the rest of my family. I had no idea that Chaim was dead and that my mother had died in Treblinka. I found my sister Leah a few months later. She and I are the only survivors of our family.

We all wanted to go home, but we remained in Buchenwald for about three months because there was nowhere else to go. The authorities had a hard time convincing us that we could not go home and that our homes were no longer there. In my case, they explained how dangerous it would be to go to Poland, where returning Jews had been attacked. I could not understand why people, other than the Nazis, wanted to kill us. It took us a long time to understand our circumstances.

During the war, many of us had promised our elders that, should we survive, we would tell the world about what had happened. But when we were liberated, the memories were too terrible to deal with. It was too soon to speak. Besides, no one was interested.

A very powerful bond developed amongst the children. All we had was one another. Looking back, I realize what a blessing it was that we were together. They were my family. It took us a while to realize that we could go outside the gates of Buchenwald. At first we didn't dare to leave the camp, but then we started to go on little excursions around Buchenwald. We really savoured this new-found freedom.

I remember a journalist from Paris who visited us and then wrote an article titled "J'Accuse," accusing the world of indifference towards the 430 youngsters who had returned from hell and yet were still in a concentration camp. As a result of public pressure, the government of France agreed to admit the children of Buchenwald, even offering us French citizenship. And so we left for Ecouis, a town in northern France. I can still remember the relief of leaving Germany, as we crossed the border into France.

### IV. Orphanage

We were taken to a huge old mansion with dormitories, run by the OSE (Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants). There, some of the Jewish children, including Elie Wiesel, demanded prayer books, services and kosher food. Although most of us had come from Orthodox homes before the war, many of us were reluctant to return to these practices. I had started to question God. Had he been on a leave of absence during the Holocaust? I was part of the group that broke away from religious observance.

As a group, we were headstrong, angry and unmanageable. They called us "les enfants terribles". We resisted going to classes and disrupted cultural events organized for us. Later, I had a chance to read some of the reports written about us at the time, which concluded that we had seen and suffered too much and could not be rehabilitated. They said that we were without redeeming value and likely to end up in jail as criminals. Obviously, the experts did not understand our trauma. As it turned out, none of us ended up in jail. Many of us became professionals, doctors, lawyers and businessmen. My friend Jezyk Zyskind became a well-known physicist. Another member of our group, Elie Wiesel, won the Nobel Prize for literature.

One day an expert was brought in to talk to us. When he came in, he took off his jacket and rolled up his sleeves. When we saw his Auschwitz number, there was a complete hush. I think our silence shocked him a little. He looked at us and finally he said “mein tiere kinder” (Yiddish for “my dear children”), and started to cry. That was the first time I openly shed a tear. I cried for the first time in five years. It was a very emotional time for me.

After that, things changed. From then on I suddenly understood that this was my life and I had to make something of it. My tough attitude was broken. Eventually, a group of about eighty of us was taken to Vesinet, a town outside of Paris, where we attended a regular school. I remained there for about three years and graduated high school. I worked very hard at school — I had so much catching up to do.

During this period a prominent Jewish couple, Jean and Jane Meyer, came to our school and offered to adopt me. They introduced me to the opera and theatre. But I felt very strongly about not giving up my name and I think that I had already decided to turn my back on Europe. The memories were too strong and painful. They were devastated when I applied to Canada for a visa. We remained close until they died and I am still in close contact with their children.

## **V. Finding a Home**

I remember being told that no country in the world, except Palestine, wanted us. Nearly all of the orphans put their names on the list for Palestine, but getting into Palestine was made nearly impossible at the time by the British blockade. The two other options open to us were Canada or Australia. Australia was attractive to many of us because it was so far from Europe.

Getting into Canada was tough. The process was a very lengthy one and you had to be absolutely healthy. Wearing glasses was enough to disqualify you. I had trouble getting approval because of my very low blood pressure. I had repeated blood tests and had all but given up hope when I finally got a letter accepting me into Canada.

I thought of Canada as a young country full of wheat fields. It seemed to be a place where I would never run out of bread. Canada represented a new life and a new beginning. Although I was anxious about the unknown, I remember feeling a tremendous amount of anticipation and excitement.

## **VI. Coming to Canada**

The voyage took about a week, which seemed quite long to me at the time. I have fond memories of the trip and remember reading Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* in French.

I was seventeen when we landed in Halifax on December, 1948. I was disappointed to learn that I was not going to Montreal, as I spoke French. I wasn't told that I was going to Calgary until I was already on the train.

On the trip west, I couldn't get over the immense space and the sparse settlements along the way. You could see forever. As I crossed Canada by train, it occurred to me that so many people could have been saved in this vast country. So much land and yet there had been no room for Jewish refugees during the war.

We were accompanied by Rowena Pearlman, a Canadian Jewish Congress volunteer who was just a wonderful lady with a heart of gold. I think she used psychology on me by telling me how wonderful the Jewish community was in Calgary. She suggested that I stop over in Calgary for just a few days to meet her family. To please her, I stopped over for two days and stayed nine years.

Calgary seemed so new and so friendly. I was astounded to learn that I did not need a passport or ID card to get around every day. I thought I needed a visa to travel to another province but was told that all I needed was a driver's licence. I paid one dollar and got my first Canadian driver's licence.

## **VII. Becoming Canadian**

My first night in Calgary I stayed with Roweena Pearlman's brother-in-law. I was so anxious to earn a living that the very next day I went to work at Smithbuilt Hats. That evening I went to live with Harry and Rachel Goresht and their children, Ida and Sam. To this day, they remain my family.

The Jewish community really opened their hearts to us. The orphans always had a standing invitation to all the simchas (celebrations), weddings and bar mitzvahs.

I had always wanted to be an electrical engineer. My mechanical and electrical aptitude had helped save me during the Holocaust. As a forced labourer in a munitions factory, it had been my job to monitor ten machines and repair them when they broke down.

Instead, I went to night school and got a diploma in accounting because it was a quick way to get a job. I desperately wanted to be on my own and independent. In 1952, I brought my sister and her family over from Israel. By then it seemed too late to go back to school to study electrical engineering.

I worked for Sam and Lena Hanen in their store. When I got my accounting diploma, I worked in the office. They were good years and I learned a lot from Lena.

In 1959 I married Gloria Lyons and we moved to Saskatoon and had two kids, a son Howard and a daughter Arlaina. I started a children's wear store, which eventually became three stores. I became very involved in the Jewish community. I was president of the Jewish community in Saskatoon and president of B'nai Brith. In 1978 we moved to Vancouver where I worked in the hotel business.

I think this is the greatest country in the world. I have had nothing but wonderful experiences since coming to Canada. When I speak to young people about my experiences during the Holocaust, I always ask them to keep an open mind when they see and meet newcomers to this country. I ask them to experience the adventure of getting to know other kinds of people. Each one of us possesses unique and wonderful qualities, regardless of colour or religion.

## **Celina Lieberman**

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### **I. Childhood in Poland**

I was born in 1931 in Zbarazh, Ukraine (formerly Poland). Later I learned that the town had been in existence since 1519. There were probably about 300 Jewish families. All my mother's brothers and sisters lived nearby. My grandmother had 9 children, so by the time I got to see all my cousins I didn't see much of the community. On Sundays, all the Jewish families would promenade in the park, with high heels and beautiful clothes. My family was very secular and Zionist. We had made plans to go to Palestine.

I lived in a fabulous world of my own and I had imaginary friends. This might be due to the fact that I was always sick with swollen glands. I had a private tutor so I wouldn't miss too much school work. Every Sunday someone came to teach me Hebrew. I also went to a regular school and I remember art classes more than anything else. I remember singing Christmas carols. They sounded pretty.

My father was a professional soldier in the Polish cavalry. He was a disciplinarian and an authority figure. When he married my mother, he took over the store that she had inherited, which sold clothes and raincoats. I used to play between the racks of clothes. My mother had been a mathematician before working in the family business doing the books. She was very bright and emancipated and went to the university. She also smoked and wore make-up — definitely not the usual woman of the day. Artur, my brother, was six years older than I was. He was tall, blonde and thin.



Because we lived so close to the border, everyone spoke Polish and Ukrainian. I listened to the stories the maids told. Later, when I hid as a Catholic during the war, all their stories about the Russian Orthodox Church helped me tremendously.

## **II. “Things began to change”**

I remember when things began to change. My parents would listen to the radio. It was about 1937 or 1938 and they were horrified at what was happening in Germany. I really didn't listen. I was too young. And then one day my father had to go to war. He packed pictures of the family. A few days later he came back. The war was over and the Russians had marched in. After my father returned, we had to go to Russian schools. Polish wasn't allowed anymore.

One day we were given pink documents, which meant, “Limited stay.” My mother said, “This can only mean Siberia. We can't survive Siberia with two children. We're going to leave.” So we put some possessions on a truck and left at night and went to father's family in Lvov.

Lvov was a very crowded city, where we lived with my father's sister. They simply allocated some room to us. But now I wish we had gone to Siberia, because some people survived Siberia. I remember one morning in 1941 I got up and my mother was standing at the window. I joined her at the window and saw the first Germans going by on motorcycles, creeping by at dawn. My mother said, “This is the end of us.”

## **III. The Lvov Ghetto**

The Lvov Ghetto started. It was miserable. At this point we were not in any danger, but I slept in a bed with my mother. Families were living on top of each other. There were nine people in a room. Conditions in the ghetto were beyond description. One of the most annoying things was the lice in our hair. It was something to be ashamed of. You could not get a bar of soap and there was no hot water. You couldn't wash clothes. My mother made hamburgers out of chopped beet leaves and fried them in oil. I think the oil came from a car, because no one in the ghetto had cooking oil. The smell was horrible, and the taste was unforgettable.

At night I would hear horrible screams and I wondered if I would ever get these inhuman voices out of my head. I didn't know at the time that they were families being deported to the concentration camps. When our turn came to be deported, it was part of the routine that all Jews cleaned up their room. The Germans would come and check and see who was handicapped and who was capable. My father was deported and I never saw him again. He died in the Janowski concentration camp.

Finally, it was decided that I must be smuggled out to Zbarazh, where I was born, before the last board went up around the ghetto. We still had relatives there. My mother made arrangements with a non-Jewish person to smuggle me out. I asked my mother if I needed a coat and she said, “No, the war will be over soon.” It was the spring of 1942. That was the last time I spoke to my mother. That was also the last time I saw my brother Artur. I had hoped that because of his blond, Aryan looks, he would survive. But he died in Zytomir forced labour camp.

## **IV. Hiding**

It must have taken me three or four days to get to Zbarazh. I remember riding, walking and then sitting in a forest. I stayed with my Uncle Adolph and Aunt Rozia for a while before they decided that I was Aryan looking enough to pass in hiding. They gathered up whatever they had — silverware, candlesticks and money — and gave it to a Ukrainian woman in the village of Berezowice, to hide me until my parents could come and reclaim me. I was hidden in an attic on her farm. She was kind to me and fed me three times a day. Then people in the village began to suspect that she might be harbouring a Jew and she got frightened and threw me out.

I walked back to Zbarazh. I was eleven years old at the time. Helena Zaleska, a Polish Catholic farmwoman found me and asked if I wanted to be her child. She was childless and wanted me for her own. She hid me, gave me the name Marishka and taught me how to behave in church. She and her brother had good hearts. They were very religious and for the record, I say that they were righteous gentiles. They were good to me. They gave me love. I worked awfully hard, but so did they. I had fresh air and whatever food they had.

I learned to be a very good Catholic and go to Church. I'd wear Helena's only pair of boots to church and when I came home, she would wear them to church. It was a relay. What bothered me was the absence of any reading material. There was only one book and that was on the lives of saints. I know every saint by heart. I developed a prayer that went something like, "Dear God, I'm not doing this to offend you, but to survive. I don't want to go to Church," and I did it in rhyme. This was my particular explanation to the Jews.

At the end of the war the Russians started to advance. A detachment came to the farm. I didn't know until a week later that this was liberation. The shooting was very frightening, but the war was over.

## **V. War's End**

I was 14 at the end of the war and believed that I was the only surviving Jew left on earth. I was no longer in danger and I had enough to eat. It did not occur to me that I could actually leave Helena. One evening as I went to close the door blown open by a snowstorm, there stood my lifelong friend Bronka. She was part of a group of 220 orphans being taken by Dr. Kotarba to Palestine but she had refused to leave Europe until she found me.

Bronka told me that there were other Jews who had survived. She convinced me that I had to return to Judaism, to honour the memory of my mother. I couldn't tell Helena that I was leaving. She would not have let me go. The next morning Bronka and I went for a walk and did not return. It is so strange to think of it, two little girls finding their way through Europe, alone with no papers and no money. Yet we did it and managed to catch up with Dr. Kotarba and the other children who were already in Prague. I wrote to Helena right away and continued to write to her for years afterwards.

## **VI. Looking for a Home**

After the war I came down with typhus, a dreaded war-time disease carried mainly by lice. My hair started to come out by the handfuls so I had to have my head shaved. My humiliation was complete; after all, everyone knew that female Nazi collaborators had had their heads shaven when they were caught.

Eventually I ended up in a DP camp with Bronka. One day on the way to a lesson I saw lines of people and American women in uniforms. I stood in line just to find out what was happening. When my turn came they asked if I was alone, meaning orphaned, and I said yes. They asked me if I wanted to go to Venezuela and I said no, it seemed too far away. They asked me if I wanted to go to Holland and I said no because so many Jews had been deported from Holland to their deaths. I did not want to go to the United States because I associated it with Al Capone and gangsters. When I was asked if I wanted to go to Canada, I immediately said yes because I had read so many books about Canada. I had always been a big reader before the war and even in the ghetto I remember exchanging books. From my readings I imagined Canada as wilderness and the Arctic.

Things began to move fast after that. Within two days I was put on a bus to Aglasterhausen, an UNRRA children's centre, where we had classes, a choir and even produced a play, but all we cared about was the boat. Rumours flew everyday about the possibility of a boat. Our disappointment was palpable.

We were all screened, medically and psychologically. You had to be under eighteen and healthy. I was the thirtieth one chosen. The grilling was phenomenal. They looked at our personality, health and character. I assume they didn't want psychotics or sick people. There were weekly appointments with horrendous scrutiny.

I always put a piece of bread into my pocket from dinner. The grown-ups told us we could always go to the dining room but I didn't believe them. All the children had bread under their pillows.

Our group was taken to Diepholz, Germany where we waited in hot and overcrowded dormitories. Finally one day we were taken to the port of Braemhaven.

I do not think that I expected much. I was without a family or a country and very little seemed to matter to me, I felt a certain apathy. I reasoned that since I had already been someone else's child, Helena's, then I could be yet another person's child in Canada. All I was told was that I was going to Regina, Saskatchewan, presumably to a Jewish family but I was not sure.

## **VII. Voyage and Arrival**

For those of us who had experienced so much during the war, going across the ocean was not such a big adventure. The big adventure had been our survival. This was just something we had to do. I remember the steamship *General Sturgis* being an old rusty tub that lumbered across the Atlantic. We all got sick eating too many hot dogs, which were a novelty for us.

There was much excitement at seeing Newfoundland. We all became incoherent. We landed in Halifax on February 14, 1948. We all stood in line in this huge hall for passport control. They still had to look at us and approve us. I remember being a bit frightened because of all the authority figures around us and knowing that once again, we had no papers.

By the time we were put on the train we were all rather wild. Some of the children just got off wherever they wanted to. I insisted that one of the other girls, Sylvia Ackermann, stay and go on with me to Regina, as we had been told.

We arrived in Regina on a brilliantly sunny and cold day. We were met by several of the city's "pillars of the community," who took us to breakfast. When we were served half-grapefruits, all we could do is look at them. We had never seen grapefruits before. None of us knew what to do with them.

The community was very good to us. Sam Promislow took us to his dry goods store and told us to take whatever we needed. I remember picking up a hairbrush and Sam said, "No, no, let me show you where the brushes with the really good bristles are."

## **VIII. Adjusting**

At first I was placed with a horrible family. They would not comprehend things. My gorgeous dress from the Swiss Red Cross, that I never got to wear, had to be burned because they were so concerned about diseases. This was my first possession and they were taking it away! There were also much deeper things. They insisted that I call them mother and father, which was something I really didn't feel like doing.

I ran away from them and was placed with Ethel and Edward Basin and their daughter Paula, who was ten years younger than I was. The Basins were wonderful to me. I still have a prayer that I wrote on July 9, 1949 thanking God for them. Auntie Ethel never made me call her mother. She was very sensitive to my loss. We maintained a close relationship until the day she died. She became a grandmother to my children.

We orphans were not easily accepted by the other Canadian children. I do not think they were trying to be mean; I just think that they had no idea what to do with us. All they had to do was to simply say, "Let's go for a walk," or "Come over to my house and let's try on some make-up together." I wish that they had just behaved normally and let us enter their lives.

## **IX. A New Life**

Auntie Ethel was approached by a non-Jewish woman, Mrs. Thackery, who had heard about the Jewish orphans and wanted to do something to help. Mrs. Thackery taught me English in her living room everyday from 8:30 am to 3 pm. Because of her I completed grade 11 and was admitted to a business college. The community made sure that my tuition was paid. After I graduated and went to work as a stenographer, I moved to Vancouver, with Auntie Ethel's blessing. I found work as an office administrator.

Later I went to Edmonton, where I married and had two children. Raising two children, I didn't quite know what was expected of me. I was desperately trying to keep them from being the neurotic children of a Holocaust survivor mother. I really didn't have the guidelines. I didn't know whether to talk about the Holocaust or not talk about it. So I compromised. Otherwise, I was just another Canadian mother. Now I have four wonderful grandchildren.



I am proud of the fact that I succeeded in having my rescuer, Helena Zaleska, honoured and given the *Righteous Among Nations* award from Yad Vashem, for her courage in hiding me during the war. Without my knowing it, Helena had also saved a Jewish mother and her two sons somewhere else on her farm.

To new immigrants and refugees, I would like to say that Canada, this country that welcomes you, is worth your total dedication. And to Canadian-born children, I ask that you be understanding and a little more open to newcomers. Extend your hand, put your welcome into words. Acceptance doesn't happen by itself.

## **Bill Gluck**

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### **I. Satu-Mare, Romania**

I was born in the small town Satu-Mare in northern Transylvania, Romania. It was close to the Hungarian border, near the foot of the Carpathian Mountains. It was a quiet town of approximately fifty thousand people of mixed ethnic backgrounds, mainly Hungarians and Romanians. Our family was Hungarian and spoke Hungarian at home, but most of the population spoke some Romanian. In 1940, Hitler ordered the Romanians to give the richest part of Transylvania back to Hungary. Overnight we all became Hungarians.



From that point on, conditions for the Jewish population became progressively worse. Laws no longer protected us. Jews were beaten and abused on the streets, in our homes and even in our synagogues. Workplaces were limited to us. Our businesses were taken over by non-Jews. Our bank accounts were confiscated without recourse. Our young men were taken away to do forced labour in the Hungarian army. Only the women, children, old people and the ill remained. We became open prey to everyone. We were completely defenceless.

In 1944, after they took all our valuables, we were herded into a ghetto. Our homes were confiscated as soon as we moved out. Misleading information was circulated telling us that we were going to work on farms. This was only to keep us from rebelling. It allowed the Germans to carry out their gruesome task without interruption. They knew we were ready to sacrifice much in order not to jeopardize the safety of our families. In the ghetto my family slept in one room with two other families.

### **II. Auschwitz & Muhldorf**

When liquidating the ghetto, they stuffed about ninety of us into a cattle car. Some people began to panic. The doors were slammed shut and there was nothing to do but hope and pray. The temperature inside soon became very hot. Fresh air was only available near the four barbed-wired openings situated at each upper corner of the wagon. The children were crying, the sick and old wheezed for lack of oxygen and water.

The two Hungarian military guards stationed outside each wagon demanded valuables from us as soon as the doors were shut. They threatened to shoot us if we did not comply. We gave them whatever little we had. At each stop, they were ready to trade wedding bands and watches for water. But the water was never delivered and some of the weaker people in the wagon were close to dying. After a few days the SS replaced the Hungarian guards. When the SS also demanded valuables, all we had left to give them were gloves, socks and spools of thread. The train moved, then stopped, and moved again for a few more days — without water, food or basic sanitation.

At the last stop we were relieved when the doors were finally opened amid much noise and mayhem. Prisoners in striped uniforms screamed at us and forcefully dragged the weak and old out of the wagons. I saw smartly dressed SS guards whacking at people with heavy walking sticks in order to make us move faster — “schnell! schnell!” (faster, faster). We were herded into two lines — one for men, the other for women. We did not know what was at the head of the line.

My father kept me in front of him and told me to make myself appear taller. When it was my turn to be in front of the officer, I told him I was 17 years old, a tinsmith by trade and a good worker. It was a lie on all three counts.

My father theorized that as long as we were of some use to them, they might keep us alive a bit longer. It worked. The officer looked down at me, smiled, shook his head, and sent me to the right. As I was running I looked back and saw my father behind me. That gave me some comfort, but soon I was separated from him and put into a group with other boys about my age.

I was 13 years old, the youngest of the three children in my family. It was the first time I had been separated from my mother. Suddenly I found myself alone, lost in that inexplicable hell and completely bewildered. I began to cry as soon as I had a moment to myself. In spite of the masses of people around me, I was all alone. I must have fallen asleep, because suddenly I was dragged out of my bunk by two large prisoners. They held me by the shoulders, ran me out of the barracks screaming very loudly and shaking me like a rag.

Outside they put me in a line of people waiting their turn to get some food. They gave me a metal dish, ordered me to get in line every time I saw food being given out and to eat it all no matter how vile it might be. They also told me to never cry again. I was petrified of them. When they were satisfied that I was really paying attention, they softly told me that I looked like a strong and resilient boy and therefore I must do everything in my power to survive and tell the world what happened to our people in Auschwitz-Birkenau. I never saw them again. I have no idea who they were. All I know is that they spoke Yiddish.

That was my introduction to the infamous Auschwitz-Birkenau, where I remained for a few weeks. I quickly learned which buildings were the gas chambers and the crematoria. The very tall chimneys were spewing foul smelling smoke, day and night, night and day, without end. When I first inquired about those chimneys, I was told that they were part of the crematorium.

"What's a crematorium?" I asked.

"That's where your parents were gassed and burned," came the answer. I was stunned.

I was soon given a prisoner number, "processed," and sent with a large group to Muhldorf concentration camp, a work camp. Our task was to build an underground cement aircraft maintenance bunker. That camp did not need gas chambers — people were dying quicker than flies. We were fed below the minimum calories required for normal existence, and were forced to work very hard. Beatings, injuries and diseases made people succumb at a rapid rate.

Being smaller than the average prisoner had its advantages; I could exist better on the meagre amount of food received. The disadvantage was that I could not hold my own when it came to physical altercations. I quickly became "camp smart" and learned the rules of survival. All my attention was focused on survival — every day, every hour, and every minute. After a while, I knew that I could survive for a long time.

At times however, I wasn't sure if I wanted to survive. I wasn't sure if I wanted to return to a hostile world. I didn't have much reason to hope that anyone else from my family would survive. In spite of all this, I had a great urge to push on and to survive. I was very careful not to exert more energy than I absolutely had to and I certainly didn't want to help the German war effort. Sometimes, I was able to barter things to get more food. I was able to secure additional warm clothing and some Polish army boots.

On April 25, 1945 they loaded many of us into cattle cars again, and transported us toward an unknown destination for mass execution. We sent some prisoners to make a deal with the officer in charge. We asked him to take us towards the oncoming American forces, instead of the execution site. In turn we guaranteed him safe passage as soon as we reached the American forces. If he had not agreed, he would most likely have been executed as a war criminal. We were very lucky that he agreed.

### **III. At Liberation**

Our train stopped near the small station of Tucing and waited. In the morning we found our guards had all disappeared. People drained of all strength lay in the wagons. I searched for some food nearby, but there was nothing. I had a quiet conversation with a young man sitting next to me. I looked into his eyes and I knew he would

die soon. We spoke of unimportant, trivial things — as if we didn't have a care in the world. He had the appearance of a man who had made peace with the idea of dying. He looked at death as an escape from the kind of life he had known. At dusk, he got up and slowly walked into the nearby woods. I did not follow, but found him in the morning, sitting, slightly covered with snow, his head resting on his arm over a fallen tree. He looked as if he had just sat down for a nap.

At dawn, on May 1st, 1945, we saw a column of tanks approaching in the valley below us. We could not recognize their insignia at first and became nervous as we tried to make sense of it all. Someone recognized the white, five-star markings on them and let out a very loud scream: "Americans!" Those who could ran down the embankment. Others rolled down toward the tanks, which had stopped moving and turned their gun turrets in our direction. We kept running in spite of the guns aimed at us.

They gave us rations and emptied their pockets and gave us chocolate. They told us in Yiddish or in German that they had to move on, but that another column would look after us. Some of our group died from over stuffing their stomachs. The doctor who came in the next column had his soldiers collect our food and fed us with controlled amounts of soup until he thought we could be transported to a nearby military hospital.

We arrived at the hospital on May 4th. German Military doctors and nurses were there to receive us. They took our lice-ridden clothes, disinfected us, and bathed those who could not bathe themselves. They put ointment on our rotting bodies and gave us light brown pyjamas to wear, all under the watchful eyes of American military personnel. On May 7 we received a five-kilo box of food from the Americans. There is no way to explain how grateful I was then, and still am, to the kind Americans who saved us from certain starvation.

#### **IV. Life as a Refugee**

As soon as we were able to be on our feet we were moved to Feldafing Displaced Persons Camp. Our group was easily recognized because we all wore the same brown pyjamas until we received regular clothes later. People recovered their health slowly. Some never recovered mentally, others did not want to. I and other young people fared better. We stayed in large spacious barracks and had ample food. After the concentration camp all food tasted great. We could never get enough of it. At the beginning, we constantly searched for more food. We needed it mentally and felt we could never have enough. Slowly, I came to be less anxious about having enough food for tomorrow.

I discovered a small group of boys my own age. We were drawn together like magnets. We only trusted one another and came to rely on each other for support. We were ready to defend each other at any cost. The only people we respected were the Americans. The only orders we were ready to obey were the American Military Police. We moved around freely in the DP camp and even in the German cities. We were rough and troubled. We were not afraid of anyone or anything.

The Munich railway station was always teeming with different people, remnants from the war. We often got into vicious fights there. We were an embarrassment to many adults in the DP camp, who were keen to return to a "normal" life and to start over again. We were loose cannons with no family or reputations to worry about. Luckily, one of the survivors, a Hungarian ex-boxing champion, got a hold of us. He trained us and made us fight in the ring. Soon there were boxing matches between the DP camps. Now all our attention was focused on winning and on pleasing our coach. He was great, tireless and we respected him.

One day one of the boys came to tell me that he had noticed a survivor named Josef Gluck posted on one of the lists. "Could he be your father?" he asked. It was the dream and fervent hope of everyone who made it through the concentration camps that by some miracle they would find at least one member of their family alive.

Word spread quickly in the camp. Everyone was excited to learn of the outcome — everyone except me. I could not understand what the fuss was about. I knew my father was a decent man and that he deserved to live, but I was unable to care about anybody at that time. When we finally met I could hardly recognize him. The old dirty jacket he was wearing hung half empty on him. His bony shoulders were bent over from the strain of starvation and suffering. I could see that he had difficulty standing. I recognized his sparkling eyes that radiated with happi-

ness when he saw me. He hugged me and began to cry. I could not understand why he was crying. Many in the crowd were crying as well — but not me. I was standing like a log when my father hugged me. I was completely devoid of any emotion or feelings. My father was still holding me when I realized something was wrong with me.

After a while, I began to spend more time with my gentle father and less with the boys. I lived with the group a bit longer and then decided to stay with my father. He was wise and had all the patience I needed as I tried to pull myself together. We began to make plans for our return to our home in Hungary.

We found my brother there. As a gentile schoolmate told me, “There are more of you returning than we sent away.” We had no intention of staying there.

On March 14, 1946 my brother and I bribed the guards at nearby Csenger and crossed over into Hungary to Budapest. We met the Bricha, Jews from Palestine who had come to save as many young Jews as they could. They took us to Austria, bribing the border guards in order to gain entry.

On March 25, 1946 we went to the DP camp, Kobenz in Austria. We stayed there only a short time, and then went to Vienna and then to Germany. We crossed at night in order not to be detected. Once across the border, we walked to the DP camp near the village of Ainring bei Freilassing. We were in the American occupied zone where we wanted to be. We knew that we had relatives in Pennsylvania and hoped to immigrate to America.

From May 1947 until August 1947, I became a policeman in an ORT training and boarding school for Jewish youths in Purten II, near Rosenheim. Later the International Refugee Organization (I.R.O.) opened a youth centre near the town of Aschau. It was a really nice camp at the foot of a beautiful mountain. We had ample good food. I had a dog and a bicycle. Life was great.

While waiting for my papers to America, I was called into the camp office and asked if I wanted to immigrate to Canada. I could qualify but not my brother, who had passed the required age of 18. I did not know how long the wait would be to go to the United States so I agreed to go to Canada. I thought I would be able to arrange for papers for my brother to follow after I got there.

On January 9, 1948 I was moved into the Prien Children's Centre, a beautiful resort beside a lake, where we all waited. While there, I was examined, had blood tests and x-rays. They must have been satisfied with the state of my health because by June 3, 1948 I found myself in the International Refugee Organization's Funk Caserne in Munich for “processing.”

## **V. Sailing to Canada**

On June 14, 1948 we were taken to the port city of Bremenhaven, Germany, given two American dollars and my first-ever bottle of Pepsi-Cola. I was sure I would get drunk before I finished the bottle. At 8:15 a.m. we boarded the *SS Marine Falcon*.

The ship was ferrying home American troops at the end of the war and had agreed to transport us to Canada. I was most impressed with the two level cots covered with snow-white sheets. The dining room was spotlessly clean. The tables were covered with spotless white tablecloths. I was very impressed with anything clean and white. Coffee, cream and sugar were left on the tables. We could have as much as we wanted during and after meals. I was in awe of everything and immediately began keeping a daily journal (in Hungarian) for the duration of the voyage. I still chuckle when I read that journal after all these years to see my youthful innocence and excitement.

This was our first ocean voyage. Some in the group became seasick as soon as the ship left the harbour, others later as foul weather set in. Soon the ship was bobbing like a piece of cork in the open sea. My lifelong friend and roommate Mike Blum thought he was dying and looked like it. The good doctor laughed at our panic and told us not to worry.

According to my diary we arrived in Halifax, at 10 a.m. on June 23, 1948. A group of kind people were waiting

for us with presents of cigarettes and chocolates. They bought stamps for those who had letters to mail. We then boarded trains with luxury sleepers and by 6 p.m. were on our way, first to Montreal, then Toronto, and Winnipeg.

## **VI. Becoming Canadian**

We pulled into the Montreal train station at 9 p.m. the following day. Representatives from the Canadian Jewish Congress and other war orphans from the earlier transports were there to welcome us. We received clothes and pocket money and were taken to a Congress run centre on Jeanne Mance Street. I went for long walks every day and enrolled in English classes at Baron Byng High School on St. Urbain Street. The Y offered us free memberships and I took full advantage of the swimming pool, gym and other facilities.

I started working nights and weekends at the Richmond Bakeries, as I needed to earn money in order to bring my brother over. After some time Congress rented a room for me with a Jewish family. I didn't like the place because no one talked to each other. I went to Congress and told them I would find my own place. That was my first independent step in Canada and I loved every minute of it.

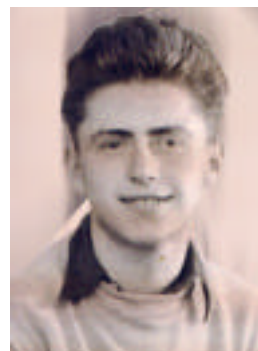
In my life, looking ahead was always more important than looking back. I enjoyed my life in Montreal. I loved the people. It didn't take long for me to forego my plan to go to the United States. I was close enough to my relatives living there and reasoned that we could visit each other anytime we wanted to. I know I made the right decision.

## **David Ehrlich**

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### **I. Gherla, Transylvania**

I was born on October 26, 1926 in Gherla, Transylvania (now Romania). My mother's family had lived there for hundreds of years, and my father's family had been there since the time of Napoleon. We were an orthodox Jewish family. There were hard times during the Depression. There were five children in our family, so we often had to wear hand-me-downs and make do with corn bread instead of wheat. My father was a merchant; he would buy and sell things. He was a young and capable man, so by the late 1930s life improved economically and we moved to a new home in Bistrita.



In 1940 our area became part of Hungary. It was at this time that we began noticing anti-Semitism. Refugees from Poland and Germany streamed into Hungary, telling local Jews what had happened to them. For us, there were quotas on high school attendance, beatings in the streets, and people were told not to buy from Jewish shops. Since I could no longer attend school, I began training as a furniture maker. I remember beginning to have the sensation of being hunted.

### **II. Deportation**

In the spring of 1944, the Germans retreated from Russia via Transylvania. After that, Jewish people did not go out on the streets, unless they had to. All commerce ceased. There were laws against Jews. They couldn't go on trains; they couldn't own property. One night in April 1944, a good friend of my father told us that he had made arrangements to be hidden by a Romanian farmer. My father refused to join him, believing that we should remain with the rest of the Jewish community, that there was safety in numbers. At 6 a.m. the next morning, we heard footsteps and a knock on the door and were told to assemble outside. We were marched to the courtyard of the synagogue, along with six to seven thousand other people. From the courtyard we were marched to a nearby farm, where a ghetto was set up. The ghetto held about ten thousand people, including some people who had been brought in from the neighbouring towns.

It was chaos for the first two weeks. Only a few people had any shelter at all; the rest of us were drenched by rain. Sanitary conditions were terrible. There were no services, no doctors or police. Then we got organized. We

demanded food from the authorities, and a kitchen was established, where you stood in line for a plate of soup. By the time we got settled, after four weeks, it was time to move us.

We were put in trucks and taken to the railroad station, and piled into boxcars. The conditions were worse than in the ghetto, with no sanitary measures at all. There was standing room only and only one tiny window with wire across it. It was cold and we didn't get any food during the three days. I remember feeling sorry for my youngest brother and my 84-year-old Grandmother. She asked us where we were going, and I said, "To Palestine".

I remember thinking that this wasn't a game, this was serious. If they can leave people in a boxcar for three days, without food or an explanation, what is it going to be like when we get there? These are barbarians. We'd better start thinking survival.

### **III. Auschwitz**

We arrived at Auschwitz at night. The lights were glaring and the guards shouted at everyone to get off the train. I remember being told to stand in a row of five or six with my Dad and two of my brothers. Behind us was my Mother, with my youngest brother and my grandmother. I remember a very tall officer with a stick pointing left and right. A "selection" was done: healthy and young on one side, old and sick to the other. I was left with my two older brothers. My mother, father, grandmother, and baby brother were taken away. My sister was put in another group.

My brothers and I went through a large hall, where we were told to take off all our clothes. I held onto some photographs and stuck them in my shoe hoping, to get them back. We went through the showers and then they sprayed us with disinfectant. At the other end we were given new uniforms. Nobody got his or her own shoes back. We also went through a barber, who shaved off our hair. I caught sight of my sister, who was crying because they had cut off her hair. She had beautiful golden blonde hair. She was concerned about her appearance. She tore off an inch from the bottom of her dress and made a belt so it would fit better. This is the last time I saw her until after the war.

The next day my left arm was tattooed with the prisoner number A-12373. Then the Germans asked if anyone was a cabinetmaker, and I raised my hand. That was my very first act of preservation. I should have stayed with my brothers. I should have looked after them, especially my older brother, who was a scholar and had never done any physical labour in his life. This was the last time I saw my brothers. They never made it.

I was totally by myself. I had nobody —no family or friends. Every morning I would get up and wash in cold water. It was very important to be neat. I used to put my trousers under my mattress so they were nicely pressed. You had to appear to be in good shape in order to survive. Everyone was given one dish, in which we were given all our food. The dish had a hole in it and you would hang it with a piece of string from your belt. And if you lost it, where were you going to get another plate? You would be lost.

I worked in a furniture factory outside of the camp and life was a little more orderly. We had a place to sleep and a bit of food. I even got to know an SS guard and volunteered to polish his boots and wash his dishes. In return, the guard gave me leftovers to eat and, later, arranged for me to transfer to another floor, where I had access to alcohol for trading purposes.

I met a boy Marvin and his father who I had known in my home town. We helped each other out a great deal. We comforted each other. Marvin and I had all sorts of fantasies about what we would do if we ever got out of there. Still, life was dangerous. Twice I had to pass "selections" at Auschwitz. I would run naked past a group of officials who would decide if people were healthy enough to work. If judged unhealthy, a guard would hook his cane around the prisoner's neck and send him to the gas chambers.

### **IV. Death March**

As the Russians started to advance, Auschwitz was evacuated and the death march began. There were thousands of us marching in the winter and snow, with one loaf of bread under our arms. We marched for three days

and three nights without stopping for sleep. By the second or third day you could barely walk. Many died on that march, because if you didn't keep up they shot you.

At last, we ended up in a big city, where we were put in a large soccer stadium. Finally we had a chance to sit down. I had rags on my feet, because it was so very cold. Then they put us on trains in open cattle cars. We travelled west for two days. Our first stop was Mauthausen concentration camp. As we walked through the very beautiful town of Mauthausen, with little bakery shops, butcher shops and people going about their work, I remember thinking what a beautiful town this would be, under different circumstances.

Then we were taken to Melk, a sub camp of Mauthausen. It was here I learned that my brothers had died the previous day in an air raid. I was in charge of hauling 50-kilo cement bags from the railroad cars to the underground ammunition factory. I did that for what seemed like an eternity. After about a month I got a break, when I was asked to drill instead of hauling cement bags. That was a little better than being outside in the rain, carrying cement bags.

When the Russian forces started to catch up in February or March 1945, we were moved to Ebensee, another sub camp of Mauthausen. Finally in April or early May, the commandant assembled all the prisoners and told us that Germany had lost the war. He said that he had orders to put us all in the underground factory and blow us up, but he could not do it. Instead, the Germans left the camp and everyone ran for the food warehouses. Soon afterwards, we were liberated by the Americans.

## **V. Realizing the Loss**

As soon as I could, I went back to my hometown, Bistrita, where I found my sister Rose and her husband. I wanted to see our family's old house. Rose tried to persuade me not to go in, but I did, and that was the first time that I broke down and cried, it was very painful. I remember entering the kitchen and there was a Hungarian woman living there. All our furniture was gone and everything was in the wrong place. Time just stopped for me in that moment; I just saw everything sort of flash through my mind. I finally broke down and cried and ran out of there. I had nothing to say to her; I just ran out and never went back again.

I stayed in Bistrita for about six months, hoping that someone else from our family would return. My parents, my brother Leibel, who might have become a rabbi, and Moishe, who had apprenticed as a shoemaker, had all perished. Mordechai is the one I miss most of all. As the youngest, everybody had adored him. He was smart and good. I often think about him. What might he have been?

I was 18 years old, and trying to figure out what to do with my life, where to go, what to do. One day I decided to leave. I didn't have any money but I heard that there was an Israeli underground group helping Jews get out of Eastern Europe. My brother-in-law gave me all the money he had, a ten-dollar American bill. I left on the train and crossed the border at night into Hungary and then hitchhiked to Budapest.

I spent about half a year in the Funk Army Barracks, which was a displaced persons camp near Munich, before making my way to France. It was difficult crossing the German-French border. People paid 100 dollars to be smuggled across. I didn't have this kind of money but was fortunate to run into a man who had known my father. He took me to France for free. I wanted to go to Israel, but not before seeing Paris.

In Paris I fell in love with life again. I worked there for one year as a cabinetmaker. At first I was living with fifty or sixty kids in an orphanage for Jewish children, called Chateau Eiffel. It was run by Jewish relief agencies. As soon as I made some money, I moved out with four others into a cheap hotel, the Hotel Chateau d'Eau. We still associated with the orphans but also began meeting many new kids. We heard that if you were 18 or younger and healthy, you could go to Canada. None of us knew anything about Canada except that there was snow and it was near the United States. I had to falsify my birth date as 1929 in order to qualify for immigration to Canada. I gave my name to the Jewish Aid Society, was interviewed by the Canadian Embassy, and received a complete medical examination.

## **VI. Coming to Canada**

I sailed on the *SS Aquitania* for two weeks. There were about 40 or 50 of us, mostly from orphanages in Paris. I was sick for the first two days, but recovered. On the boat we talked about the future and were full of anticipation. I hoped some rich people would see me and say, "You belong to us and we will educate you." I badly wanted an education, since I had only completed grade seven or eight before the war.

The boat docked in Halifax, where a group of Jewish teenagers came and picked us up. We stayed in Halifax for one night with the Rosenfeld family and communicated with them in Yiddish, French, and sign language. I knew three words of English at the time: "yes," "no," and "O.K." The next day we got on the train and I was in a car with John Hirsch. We both looked at a map of Canada and said, "Winnipeg is a good choice because it is geographically in the middle." As we travelled by train I began to realize just how huge Canada was — this was a revelation.

## **VII. Becoming Canadian**

When John Hirsch and I arrived in Winnipeg, we were met by Mrs. Clara Miles and others from the National Council of Jewish Women. Our group met almost daily for two weeks, taking English lessons. I picked up the language quite rapidly and after two weeks was courting girls. The Shack family, that took John and me in was supposed to house us only temporarily, but after a few months Mrs. Shack said we could stay as long as we wanted. She loved feeding us. After only two weeks Mr. Shack found me a job in a furniture business as a cabinetmaker. For two years I went to night school, continuing my English lessons and learning a bit of history. I stayed in touch with the other orphans in Winnipeg by meeting with them at the Y. I stayed in Winnipeg for six years.

I quickly became a Canadian young man. I learned the language and bought myself a bicycle. I had always wanted a bicycle and I paid cash for it. I saved my money for two or three years, until I had a couple of thousand dollars saved up and in 1950 I was able to bring my sister and brother-in-law to Canada from France.

I got married in 1952, and a year later moved to my wife's hometown of Yorkton, Saskatchewan. I was happy to be a part of her family there. I had no family of my own and wanted to be part of something. I joined the golf club, the Kinsmen service club and became very active in the community. After working twenty-three years in the dry cleaning business, we retired to Vancouver. I have three sons and two grandchildren. Coming to Canada was a good choice. I was lucky to have been able to take advantage of the great opportunities open to me in Canada.

When I see my children and grandchildren growing up in this wonderful, multicultural city of ours, I am more convinced than ever that we must learn to tolerate each other regardless of race, colour or religion. I ask young people to resist all forms of discrimination in their schools, including bullying or exclusion of any kind. I tell them this as someone who saw what prejudice can lead to when it goes unchecked.

## **Regina Feldman**

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### **I. Bedzin, Poland**

I was born on December 6, 1931 in Bedzin, Poland, a city with a population of 75,000, about a third Jewish. It was a large and thriving Jewish community. My family included my father, mother and two older brothers, David and Victor, who we called Voltleb at home. Though we were not ultra-orthodox, we attended Shul every Friday night. I had quite a few aunts and uncles. Only one cousin survived the Holocaust.

We were not rich and my father worked very hard. He was a tailor who made suits for clothing stores. He worked from our home, which consisted of two rooms. One room was used as our bedroom and eating area, while the other was used as my father's workshop and the kitchen. The building had no indoor plumbing.





I attended Jewish kindergarten and one year of public school. In 1939 the war began and I wasn't allowed to go to school any longer. My brothers couldn't go to school either and my father lost everything. I didn't know the reasons, but I knew something was dreadfully wrong. I sensed the fear and the tension. My father made yellow stars for us to wear and sewed them onto our garments. Suddenly our relationship with our Polish friends changed. They weren't our friends anymore. They were our accusers. As children we didn't really know that much, we just saw and felt the difference.

## **II. The Ghetto**

One morning the Gestapo came to our door. We were ordered to pack one suitcase each, and immediately assemble in the courtyard outside. There I saw my friends, relatives and neighbours. We were marched to an area of our city designated to be a Jewish ghetto. There we were assigned living quarters consisting of one large room, which we as a family of five had to share with another family of four. I saw nothing unusual about the situation. I simply thought my parents had decided to move. We were forbidden to own a radio, to go outside of the ghetto, or to attend school. We were given coupons for rationed food. I can still see my mother dividing the bread for the day. We got used to living in these conditions. My dad and one of my brothers were picked up every morning to work in a factory making uniforms for the Germans.

As time went on, things became more difficult. We were completely cut off from the rest of the world. My mother was pregnant at the time. I remember that she took my brothers and me aside and tried to explain what was happening. She said, "If we should ever be separated, no matter where you are, you should all make your way back home and we will be a family again." Her words still ring in my ears. One day my mother had to go to the hospital to have the baby. She was taken away and my dad went with her. That is the last I saw of her. She never came home. My dad came home and said we had a baby brother, but I never saw him either. And I don't know what happened to my mother and the baby. I was only eight years old at the time.

One day, my dad said that he had heard that they were going to start deporting people from the ghetto. First the Germans came and picked up all the men, including my father and brothers. I hid with the other family that we were living with under the stairs. Their baby started to cry, so we were found out and taken to a football stadium.

When we arrived at the stadium, I saw what looked like thousands of people divided into three groups. I later learned that the first group was for professional people with skills useful to the SS. They were taken back to the ghetto to continue working. The second group consisted of strong, healthy people who were to be sent to labour camps. The third group was for children, old people and the disabled, people who were not useful to the SS. Later I learned that their fate was to be extermination. At the entrance to the stadium stood an SS guard with a dog and a large stick. He decided which group we were to join. I was sent to the third group for extermination. Suddenly, I saw my father and brothers in the first group. Wanting to be with them, I started to run towards them. My father saw me and started to run towards me. He was stopped by a soldier, beaten and pushed back to his group. In the confusion, I made it into the second group.

## **III. Concentration Camps**

Later that day, we were taken to the train station, where we were pushed into cattle trains and taken from Poland to Germany. I don't remember how long it took for the trains to reach Klettendorf, my first camp, but I do remember that I was hungry and scared and I just wanted to go home to be with my parents. I was only nine and a half years old.

When we arrived at Klettendorf, Germany, I saw that it was a camp for men and women, who were separated by a wire fence. When the camp became too crowded, the women were transferred to Ludwigsdorf. I was a prisoner in the two camps for three years and eight months of my life, away from my family and loved ones. There were only three youngsters in that camp: myself; Polla, the daughter of the family we had lived with in the ghetto; and one other girl. The older Jewish women took us under their wings. It's something very hard to describe, but I soon realized that I would have to learn to endure the hardship, hunger, loneliness and humiliation.

The barracks consisted of stacked beds. I don't remember any blankets or anything like that. We were given only a little bit of food. Mostly it was potatoes, water and a tiny piece of bread. Once I remember being so hungry

that I ate raw beets and my tongue became so sore that I couldn't close my mouth. But when you're hungry, you just eat anything.

Every morning we were lined up, counted and taken into town to do our day's work. I worked in a munitions factory, making bullets and bombs. My job was to weigh the gunpowder for the bullets. It had to be an exact weight or else it created an explosion, which the Germans called sabotage and for which we were all punished. I also dug ditches, mixed cement, cleaned toilets and the barracks for the SS women guards, who were very cruel. I did just about anything, because I was determined to survive. This was how I spent my childhood years.

Yet even in the midst of the inexcusable evil towards mankind, there was a touch of humanity shown to me by one German women guard. Sometimes when I worked the night shift in the factory she would put me in a corner so that I could rest. Whenever she could, she called me and the other two girls into her barracks to clean and there she would feed us. Her parents used to bring extra food for us. She was our salvation, so I cannot blame all Germans. Some helped in whatever way they could.

#### **IV. The End of the War**

Near the end of the war, we were told that we were going to be marched out of Ludwigsdorf. The Germans knew that the Russians were coming. As it happened, the Russians came so quickly that the Germans didn't have time to take us with them. In the morning when we got up, none of the guards were there. At first we didn't know what to do. We were afraid to go out. Then we heard singing. It was the men from Kletterdorf coming to find their wives. People were shouting that we were free. I didn't know what freedom meant. Where do you go, what do you do, who will take you? I was thirteen years old.

I immediately started to search for my family. I showed everyone I could the picture of my family that I had folded and kept hidden all those years. I knew that my mother wasn't alive but I still hoped to find my father and brothers.

My mother's words echoed in my ears. But how could I go back to Poland? I didn't even know where I was. Not knowing how to return to my home in Poland, I remained in the town of Ludwigsdorf for a while with an older couple from my hometown who befriended me.

From there we moved to the little town of Feldafing, where the barracks once used by the Germans as a Hitler Youth School had been turned into a kibbutz. It was during my stay at Feldafing that my cousin and his wife found me and took me to live with them in the Fulda DP camp. For the first time since I had left home, I had a family again. My cousins were very good to me.

#### **V. Immigration to Canada**

There was a Jewish Community Centre in the Fulda DP camp where they took an interest in all the young people who had survived. One day, somebody from UNRRA (United Nations Relief & Rehabilitation Administration) came to find kids who could be sent to the United States or Canada and educated. I remember they had to ask my cousins, who were my guardians, whether I could go. My cousins told me that if I went to Canada or the United States, where the people were rich, I would never have to worry a day in my life.

So I packed my suitcase and was taken to a transit camp called Aglasterhausen DP Camp, where I met many other young people. We became very close, almost like a family. The day came when we were taken by the UNRRA representatives to Braemerviken, where we boarded the ship *SS Sturgis* bound for Canada. During the crossing my legs were badly swollen. I spent most of my time in my bunk, hoping that my new life would be easier and that I would have a new family. It was my dream to be wanted and loved, and I was looking for understanding and acceptance.

#### **VI. Arrival**

We arrived in Halifax in February 1948. The ship was met by the social worker Mrs. Jean Rose and people from the Canadian Jewish Congress. I was still sick when we booked into the hotel for the night. A doctor was called

and diagnosed my illness as Beriberi. He advised that I be taken to a doctor upon my arrival in Vancouver. The next morning we boarded a train and arrived in Vancouver four days later.

## **VII. Becoming Canadian**

My new foster parents were Harry and Tillie Brook, who were very nice, but older than I had hoped. Thankfully, they spoke Yiddish, which is how we were able to communicate. They tried very hard to make me feel at home, but somehow we never developed the closeness I was looking for and I often felt lonely. I stayed with them until the end of the year. I remember celebrating my 16<sup>th</sup> birthday at their house.

I attended Prince of Wales School to learn English with Mr. Clark as my teacher. After about a year, I moved into the home of Myrna and Al Kohlberg. I found employment as a seamstress at Cordell's Ladies Wear on Hastings Street, working for 35 cents an hour. I was able to pay for my room and board. Mr. Kohlberg drove me to work every morning. For the first time in my life I felt happy and accepted. They were wonderful people and we always remained very close.

One day I went to a bazaar at the Jewish Community Centre and there I met the love of my life. David is the man I'm still married to after over fifty years. Without him I don't think I could have done anything. He was also a Holocaust survivor. We got married in 1950. It was a community event. There was no one to make the wedding, so I made my own wedding. Someone gave me a wedding gown that I had cut down to fit me. Someone gave me 15 dollars and I bought a veil. Someone else gave me 20 dollars for a pair of shoes. And there was the bride, ready to go.

To this day I am grateful to the Jewish community for bringing me here and I thank Canada for allowing us in. My heart cries for all the people who have perished unnecessarily. I wish there would be some peace now everywhere in the world. Children should not have to suffer anywhere at any time.

## **Leo Lowy**

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### **I. Childhood in Berehovo**

I was born in 1928 in Carpathia (now Ukraine), in the city of Berehovo, which was known for its rabbis. I came from a close family. I had five sisters, including my twin sister Miriam. My oldest sister was married and had a child. I had many uncles, aunts and cousins who lived in the same city. Our family observed the Jewish traditions and went to Synagogue services on Friday nights. I attended cheder (Jewish school) as well as public school.



Things started to change for us in 1938. The Hungarians came into power and the Czech government ceased to exist. I started learning Hungarian in school. Some members of the Hungarian regime were anti-Semitic and adopted the swastika as their symbol. They robbed Jewish families of their belongings and caused us a lot of problems.

### **II. Auschwitz-Birkenau**

About three years later, about 1940-1941, things escalated suddenly. I remember that panic set in when we heard about an uncle and aunt and their family who were taken from their home and deported to Poland for not having the proper documents. News filtered out that they were executed. At first we couldn't believe that something that inhumane could have happened.

In 1943 some prominent Jews from our town were taken to the synagogue and held there for ransom. Everyone gave as much money as they could, but the men were never released. Soon afterwards, everyone in our town was rounded up. The Hungarians took my family and me to a brick factory. Then we were transported to Auschwitz by train, with a hundred or more people crowded into a cattle car. There was little food and no facilities. They slammed the door shut, and we rolled along for days. We arrived in Auschwitz in the middle of the night but they didn't open the doors until the morning. We had to listen to people screaming and dogs barking. The cries and the stench of that car is something I will never forget.

We were lined up along the tracks and soldiers went up and down the rows, looking for people with physical abnormalities and for twins. One of our neighbours called out that she had twins and pointed to Miriam and I, saying that we were also twins.

Miriam and I were taken to a hospital in Birkenau. We were told that everything would be all right and that we would be reunited with our parents later. Something didn't seem right, though, and I was scared. I asked some people what was happening there and they pointed to the chimneys. I never told my sister Miriam. I kept it a secret from her because I wanted to protect her. From that day on, I never took my eyes off those chimneys.

We were taken to a separate place and visited by Dr. Mengele, who the inmates called "Dr. Death." For about nine months, Mengele and many other doctors examined my sister and I, sometimes alone and sometimes together. They injected us with fluids and took blood samples from us. I was only about fourteen at the time.

Day after day, they measured different parts of our bodies. They checked our hands, our bone structure and our eyes for colour comparisons. They also took samples of our hair. It was very scary because the rooms we were taken to did not look like laboratories. They were grey and dingy.

As twins we were treated a little more humanely, because Mengele needed for us for his medical experiments. One day when I was doing some work with three men, we ran into two drunken German soldiers, who hauled us into a vacant room. The soldiers started beating the men with canes and made them jump out of a window. There must have been an angel watching over me, because when my turn came, I just blurted out the words, "Dr. Mengele" and "twin." The soldiers just froze and let me go. Being one of Dr. Mengele's experimental subjects saved me.

There were some twins in our group who were so identical that we couldn't tell them apart. There were also people with physical deformities and one family, seven of whom were dwarfs. I had the misfortune of having the same blood type as one of the German soldiers. One day they took me and laid me on a table and put a tube in me and another tube in the soldier. They transferred my blood to him, which was very scary.

As they were doing these experiments, I was just grateful that it wasn't worse than I expected. I often felt dizzy. I don't know if it was the fear or the drugs and dyes that they had injected. The doctors never explained what they were doing. We were drained physically and emotionally. We lost a lot of weight, not only because of the diet but also because of our fear of what the next step would be.

My friend Kalman and I slept in the same bunk and were inseparable. Kalman and his twin sister Judith were also part of Dr. Mengele's experiments. Every day Kalman and I had to go to the guardhouse and clean the floors and shine the guards' boots. If our job was not satisfactory, we were beaten. I quickly learned not to cry.

Every morning, the first thing we did was check to see how many of us had died during the night. It was very scary. I saw people being beaten. I saw corpses brought in from the concentration camps to be experimented on. I recognized some of these corpses as people from my hometown.

### **III. At Liberation**

In January of 1945, we were marched a couple of miles from Birkenau to Auschwitz in the heavy snow and bitter cold. I was able to escape and hid in a basement. I waited until morning, when everything was quiet and all the screaming had stopped. When I came out of my hiding place, the camp had been deserted. Slowly, some other prisoners began to emerge. A couple of hundred of us gathered. A few days later we were liberated by the Russians.

Later I learned that my twin sister Miriam had, by some miracle, met up with our three other sisters on the death march from Auschwitz. They were liberated by the Americans about four months later. Miriam survived; unfortunately, my three other sisters were so weak that they died within a week of liberation. If it wasn't for the fact that Miriam and I were twins, we would not have survived.

Everyone else in my family — my parents, aunts, uncles and cousins — were all gassed in Auschwitz. I would never have survived had I not been a twin. I was so small in stature that I wouldn't have been of any use to the Nazis in a work camp. All the other children from my hometown were gassed on the day of our arrival in Auschwitz. None survived.

#### **IV. Displaced Person**

After liberation I stayed on a kibbutz, which had been set-up on a German farm near Munich. It was run by a Zionist organization. There were about fifty people on the kibbutz, many of them from my home town in Carpathia. We tried to get to Israel in June 1945 but were arrested crossing the Alps from Austria into Italy. About two weeks later we were taken back to where we had started. Later, we made it to Italy, where we spent a short time in Rivoli, near Torino. From there we went to a displaced persons camp in Cremona, where Miriam and I stayed for about a year and one half.

While I was in the displaced persons camp, I got some training from ORT in electronics and radios. One day, I met a fellow from my home town. He was older than we were and a very smart guy, a genius. He knew about seven or eight languages and had a job working for UNRRA in the office. One day he made the remark to me: "How would you like to go somewhere else? I can get you into Canada on a quota." He helped us apply and got the ball rolling.

It took them almost a year to get everything ready and for us to be examined. We had to go to Milan for the health examinations. In the spring of 1948, after many promises, we finally boarded the ship for Canada. I had to make myself younger because the cut-off was 18. I was actually 19, but I tried to make myself appear younger. I shaved carefully — I didn't want to show my age. My birth date was an embarrassment to me for many years afterwards. Whenever someone asked me when my birthday was, I had to stop and try and figure out how old I was supposed to be.

#### **V. Voyage**

Finally, I sailed with a group of orphans from Genoa, Italy on March the 10th, 1948 on the *Nea Hellas*, a Greek ocean liner. The trip took two and a half weeks. At first, everyone in our group was seasick. We were each given five American dollars in spending money. I bought cigarettes, which were 15 cents a package, and chocolate bars. I had never had such things. I really pigged out. In the concentration camp and in the DP camp, we had smoked Machorka — chopped wood wrapped in newspapers.

There were about 115 Jewish kids on the boat. Leslie Spiro was one of them. When the ship landed in Halifax, a group of Jewish people from the community met us and gave us a beautiful reception.

#### **VI. Becoming Canadian**

When my twin sister and I arrived in Vancouver, we were separated and sent to live in different homes. My sister went to Isaac Chernov's house and I went to stay with Max Fox and his wife and two children, Priscilla and Ernest. I stayed with them for over a year. I spoke a few languages when I came, mainly Yiddish and Hungarian, but not a word of English. Luckily, Mr. and Mrs. Fox spoke Yiddish, so I could converse with them and I felt right at home. I started going to Prince of Wales High School. I remember that about three weeks after I arrived, I was asked to recite some Shakespeare and I did, but with a very heavy European accent.

When I left school I was offered two or three different jobs. I ended up working for the Chernovs, the family who had taken my sister in. They owned Front Street Furniture in New Westminster, where I began working on May 29, 1950. While I was working there, I got to know the owner of Horne's Men's Wear and when Mr. Horne said that he was going to retire, I decided that I wanted to buy the store. The Fox and Chernov families helped me by undersigning a \$500 bank loan for me, which allowed me to buy the store. In 1954 I married Jocy Kalensky. Now we have three sons, Gary, Stephen and Richard, and two grandchildren, Seth and Nathan.

In 2000, my wife, sons and I travelled back to Auschwitz-Birkenau to make a film about my life story called "Leo's Journey." About a year later, Kalman Bar-On, my friend from Auschwitz-Birkenau who was living in Israel,

saw the film and contacted me. Reconnecting with him was very important to me. It helped me complete my journey.

## **Leslie Spiro**

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### **I. Childhood in Hungary**

I was born in Hungary on December 25, 1927, in the town of Matesalka, which was an average-sized town in the province of Satmar. Jews and gentiles lived together. Our next door neighbours were gentiles.

My father had a university degree and was a banker, a trade that may have been easier for Jews to enter than others. I think banking was less affected by anti-Semitism. He was also a great sportsman. He even went to the 1939 Olympic Games in Berlin. I remember that he was very upset when he came home. I don't know when my parents married. I was not an only child. I had a sister Katalin who was three years older than me and who was a very good pianist.



The Jewish community itself was well represented with three synagogues and a mix of both Orthodox and Conservative Jews. I was brought up in a very Orthodox way. My grandfather, on my mother's side was a very religious man. He was one of the officials in the synagogue and led a very religious life.

The first years of my education were in a Jewish day school. Even though the school was Jewish, my formal learning of Hebrew took place in another institution after school. The fact that the principal was a friend of my father did not bode well for me, and I can recall several lickings received at the hands of the schoolmaster. After attending the Jewish school, my education continued at a regular government school. My father hired a private tutor to teach my sister and I English. My dad was very well educated and thought it was important for us to learn English.

I remember some anti-Semitism from my childhood. It usually took the form of name-calling, fighting, or being chased by other kids. They probably learned this from home as no one is born with such an attitude — it is taught. Such incidents were simply seen as part of life.

Hungarian Jews were not deported until near the end of the war, but life started to become more difficult for us in the late 1930s and early 1940s. At first we did not know what was going on in other countries. But by 1939 we began to see Polish Jews passing through our town carrying suitcases and packages. I did not give much thought as to why they were escaping. I cannot remember my parents talking about leaving Hungary. I know we had some relatives in the United States, with whom they were in contact. My father never really mentioned leaving. Life was still bearable and comfortable. Hungary was one of the last places where anything real bad happened to the Jews.

In 1942 I was not allowed to go to school any more. As was the case with many children, I could not continue my studies in higher education as the number of slots made available to Jews was quite small. Instead of school I went to work at a furniture factory, run by a friend of my father. I was fifteen years old when I began learning the trade of a cabinetmaker. The Nazis came in the spring of 1944 and then suddenly, within a few days, everything was changed.

### **II. Into the Ghetto**

The Germans moved into Hungary around March of 1944. With the help of the Hungarian police, the Germans quickly rounded-up all of the Jews and placed them, with the exception of the community leaders, in the Matesalka Ghetto. Jewish community leaders, including my father, were brought by the SS to one of the synagogues, interrogated, and immediately transported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. I never saw my father again.

The Hungarian police came around and they put us all in the ghetto. Part of the town was barricaded with fences and they made a ghetto out of it. The ghetto was the holding area for all the Jews in the surrounding area, not only the people of Matesalka. Conditions in the ghetto were terrible with no kitchen or sanitation facilities. Ten people or so to a single room. I slept on the floor. I was with my mother, her parents, my aunts, and sister.

At this point, most people did not know what fate awaited them. There may have been a few exceptions like the dentist, a friend of my father, who killed himself, apparently after learning from his German nurse information on what was happening in the camps. I never heard of anyone trying to escape from the ghetto.

We were in the ghetto for seven to ten days before being put on trains for Auschwitz-Birkenau. The ride lasted two or two-and-a-half days and, as in the ghetto, the conditions in the cattle cars were awful. We were all packed in like sardines. It was terrible. Many people were crying and moaning. We were terrified.

### **III. The Concentration Camps**

When we arrived at Birkenau, we were herded onto a platform, our belongings taken, and a selection process began. We were met by Dr. Mengele and other Nazi officers. I was immediately separated from my mother, sister and grandparents and selected for work. They brought me to the barracks and the next morning I was tattooed on my arm with the number A12929 and sent over to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Work was actually outside the camp in a factory that made wood for German military barracks. My duties included cleaning the machines and taking the wood shavings and sawdust to the dump.

My living quarters were Block 18A, and there was a kapo who looked-after the barracks. I was issued striped clothing, a spoon and a plate. That's it. In the morning my work detail received coffee and the daily rations since we would not be back in the camp until evening. Everyday we would be marched from the camp to work, and from work back to the camp, always under close watch. Sometimes we went by the gas chambers. You could smell the crematoria. Sometimes they had to burn bodies in open pits. There were gallows in front of my block. I remember when they hung some people who had escaped. We had to stand until three in the morning watching the hanging.

At first I didn't know what happened to the rest of my family. It was from other prisoners who had been in the camp a while that I learned about their fate. It was a terrible experience, especially for a young person like myself who had never experienced anything like this before. I had always been at home and had had a good childhood and everything else. I was very young, one of the youngest who survived out of there. Not many my age survived there.

At the beginning of January, 1945, the Russian Army was closing in on the camp. The Germans transported the prisoners to the west, first killing those who were sick or unable to make the journey. I was placed in a cattle car headed for Mauthausen concentration camp. It was very cold and I didn't have warm clothes. My feet were frozen so badly from the cold that I could not walk. Fortunately for me, when I arrived at the camp, a French Jew carried me and hid me in a makeshift hospital. When they took off my shoes, parts of my toes on my left foot came off. Since the Germans were killing those with physical problems, I was very lucky. I spent a long time on my back and was cared for and fed by my new-found friend. He put some stuff on my feet, axle grease or something like that and wrapped them up with paper and he looked after me for days. He shouldn't have. It was dangerous for him.

### **IV. Liberated**

The Germans left the camp a few days before liberation, realizing that the Americans would soon be arriving. Liberation was on the 5th of May. I still remember that day, a lot of emotions. When the gate first opened, there was this Jewish boy from New York. He didn't speak much Yiddish. I remember he sat down on a big stone, took off his helmet and cried. But, many of us died from malnutrition and starvation even in the care of the Americans. They were giving us this army food and nobody was used to it. We were not used to eating much more than bread and plain soup. I did not see the French man who had saved my life. I was never able to track him down.

I spent one month being fixed-up by a mobile American Army medical unit. After being released, I traveled around Germany quite a bit, asking questions on the whereabouts of my family and checking survivor lists. In July I took a train back to Hungary. When I got home, what you call home, my sister was there. She had survived along with an aunt, and an uncle who had survived a work camp in the Ukraine. I found out then for sure what had happened to my mother. She had been with my sister for a while until she got sick and then she was eliminated. My grandparents had been selected for the gas chambers immediately when they arrived at Auschwitz-Birkenau. The rest of my family who had been sent to Birkenau were also dead.

## **V. Refugees**

My sister and I left Hungary, spent some time in Vienna, before arriving in Deggendorf, a displaced person's (DP) camp near Munich in Bavaria. There were all these welfare organizations, UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration), the American Joint Distribution Committee and others who started to come around to see us and organize us. They started to set up camps and the survivors were registered and fed, given clothing, whatever. We spent a year and a half in the DP camp, still looking for people we had known. I wanted to emigrate to Israel, but couldn't because of the British blockade at the time. My sister, on the other hand, fell in love with someone and moved back to Hungary with him. Again, I traveled around looking for a ship that could take me to Israel.

Because I spoke English, I started working for the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee in the Bergen-Belsen DP camp. I worked in the immigration department. There was a map of the world up in the office. I still thought that I would go to Israel but when I heard about the plan to send kids to Canada, I decided I couldn't wait. I signed up several other kids to go to Canada too. We had to be under age 18. I applied for a visa to Canada with the help of the Canadian Jewish Congress. The reason I chose Canada was that it was the first opportunity open to us and I wanted to leave the DP camp as soon as possible.

## **VI. A Home in Canada**

I arrived in Montreal in 1948. I was already eighteen and couldn't go to school anymore, which I would have loved to. I wanted to take architecture at the time.

At first I stayed in a dormitory in the Hebrew Immigration Aid Society on Jeanne Mance Street. Eventually, I went to live with Mr. and Mrs. Garoff and their son and daughter. I stayed with them until 1951 and then moved with them to Vancouver. Mr. Garoff had asthma and was told to move to Vancouver by his doctors. They were marvelous to me. They treated me like their own. I lived with them in Vancouver for a few years, until they finally sold their house. Mr. and Mrs. Garoff have passed away now, but I am still in touch with their children.

My ability to speak English enabled me to seek work while many other immigrants had to spend time learning a new language. With the help of a social worker and the Canadian Jewish Congress I got my first job in Montreal, working as a timekeeper in the Dominion Lock Company. My wage was fifty cents an hour. From that I had to pay room and board and everything. So, by the time you had a hair cut, you had no money. Finally, I found work in my own field, when a furniture factory hired me. The factory was owned by a Jewish man who did not need any new workers at the time, but hired me anyway. He was a very nice man, a very fine man. My pay was raised thirty cents an hour. I changed jobs once more in Montreal for even better pay. When I came out to Vancouver in 1951 I found work again as a cabinetmaker.

## **VII. Reflections**

Sometimes I sit down and think about losing my youth in such a manner, but it happened and there's no way you can ever reconcile or recapture that. Your childhood is gone and in such a manner that you never recover sometimes.

Some things stay with you. I give you an example. I am a single man but when I come home, my cupboards and fridge are always full of food. You are always worried that you will be hungry. It is something you can't explain. While not everyone can, it is important to talk and not let the past stay bottled-up inside.



I visited my sister in Hungary and her son many times, until she passed away. I don't care to go back to Hungary very much, though.

## **Mariette Rozen**

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### **I. Childhood**

I was born in Brussels, Belgium in 1935, the youngest of eleven children. My earliest memory is of my mother making lokshen kugel (noodle casserole). I remember the smells of my mother making gefilte fish and of the fish swimming in the laundry tub. She didn't do it like we do today. She took the whole fish and stuffed it and put the carrots around the rim of the plate.



I never went to school because I was only four years old when the war began in 1939. I remember being surrounded by my brothers and sisters. My brother Henri taught me a geography game that we played in the sand. We had a dog, Jacqui, who was white with a black eye. I remember going to the community baths with my mother. I remember her hugs and kisses.

We lived in an apartment, up two flights of stairs. There was a large room with a big kitchen table and a stove. I slept with my mother in her bedroom. My mother also had a sewing room where she made her living, sewing uniforms. I remember stealing sugar cubes from the china cabinet.

My father died when I was a year and a half old. I never knew him. After he died, my mother couldn't support so many children so Albert, Bernard, Henri, Esther & Jacques were sent to an orphanage for a while. My brothers Charles and Jules and sister Sarah were already married and not living at home.

### **II. Into Hiding**

One day, my mother came home and sewed a yellow star on my jacket. I remember my brother Jean saying to me, "Mariette take the star off." I used to always take it off and my mother used to sew it back on again. Then the Germans told everyone to register the names of all family members at the police station or be deported. My mother did what she was told and registered all our names, even those of our aunts, uncles and cousins. My oldest brother Jean yelled at my mother for this. I remember this clearly because at that time no one dared to raised their voice to their parents. I was frightened.

I remember Esther, Henri, Jacques, Maman & I trying to walk to Paris, where Sarah was living. There were lots of people walking on the road. A plane dive-bombed everyone and Henri saved us all by pushing us into the ditch.

Eventually, Jean separated us all and placed us in different hiding places. I remember him telling me to kiss Maman goodbye. My next memory is of being with a strange family. I think that my mind went into shock. I never cried. I became a child of silence. I was so hurt. While the children in the house went to school, I used to sit under the kitchen table. I wasn't allowed to go outside.

Afterwards, Jean moved me around to many different hiding places and I lived with so many different people. Jean told me to always remember who I was and that I was Jewish, but never to tell anyone my last name, for fear that it would reveal that I was Jewish. I don't think I really understood but I knew not to ask questions. Henri was the one who kept track of where we all were during the war and would always keep in touch with me.

On my seventh birthday, I was taken by a woman I didn't know to meet my mother. As we neared the house, we saw the Germans putting my mother and brother Albert on a truck. My mother was all dressed up for my birthday. The woman grabbed me and told me to stop screaming. That was the last time I saw my mother.

### **III. Orphanages**

Eventually I was hidden in a convent. I remember the Mother Superior waking me up in the middle of the night and telling me to hide in the sewers of the convent. One of the nuns had found out that I was Jewish and had reported me to the Gestapo for the reward money.

Afterwards, I was moved to a Catholic orphanage. I stayed in a few different orphanages in Belgium, Luxembourg and Paris. I was never in one place long enough to remember their names. I learned to speak many languages, Yiddish, Polish, Flemish, French, Dutch and Swedish. I was very lonely. I became a void, without any feeling at all.

I was ten years old and still in an orphanage when the war ended. One of the other little girls in the orphanage had a sister who happened to know where my sister Esther was living. That is how Esther found me. She took me to live with my brother Charles in Brussels. Of the eleven brothers and sisters, eight of us survived. Jean, who had been a member of the Resistance, was killed by the Germans during the war. Simon died three weeks after liberation in Auschwitz.

### **IV. Journey to Canada**

I read somewhere that Jewish children wanting to leave the country could go to city hall to apply for immigration, so we did. We got two passports — one for Henri and myself, and one for Esther and Jacques.

We sailed from Brussels to London. I was so seasick. In London, we were put in another orphanage that was like a castle to me. It was very drafty and cold. No one spoke French, and I remember trying to find paper. I always tried to leave notes everywhere I went — in the underground train station, the bus station — in the hope that my sister Sarah might see them. From London we boarded the SS Aquitania to Halifax. Again, I was sick the whole time and spent practically the whole trip in the sick bay.

I arrived in Canada on December 2, 1947. I was twelve years old but with the mind of an old person. I wore a nametag, pinned to my coat with a safety pin. We went into a building with bars on the window. It looked like a prison to me and I worried that I had done something wrong. We had been told that Canada was a free country and that we would be welcome, but when we arrived, we were guarded like we were in a prison camp.

The customs officers took everything we had, and we were too afraid to mention this to anyone. What they put us through when we arrived in Halifax was terrible. Finally, after they examined us, we were put on a train across Canada. On January 3, 1948 we arrived at the train station at the foot of Granville Street in downtown Vancouver.

### **V. Becoming Canadian**

I had no expectations about what Canada would be like, none. For a long time afterwards, I wanted to hide who I was and where I had come from. I didn't want to associate with other survivors, because I did not want to be identified as a survivor. My siblings and I were like strangers. Because we had been separated throughout the war, we were not bonded like most families. We loved each other but we seemed to have nothing in common. That's what the war did to us. To this day, I have trouble trusting people.

We were all worried about who we were going to live with in Canada. When we arrived in Vancouver I was separated from my sister and brothers. We all went to live in different homes. I went to live with my foster parents, Joe and Minnie Satanov, who were childless. When Mr. Satanov came to the train station and saw me, he said, "I want that little girl." The social worker Jean Rose, took me to their great big house. Mrs. Satanov was in the kitchen ironing and didn't even look my way when I arrived. I knew right then that she didn't want me but I had no choice and was too tired. They took me to my room and Jean Rose said good-bye. I asked for Esther's, Jacques' and Henri's phone number and I called them right away and told them to come and get me.

I ran away twelve times that year. I was quite wild. I had to learn the rules of the house. After having lived on the streets for so long, I didn't know that meal times were at breakfast, lunch, and dinner. It took me about three

months before I was able to talk to anyone.

Over the years, I developed a wonderful relationship with the Satanovs. They became like my parents. They bought me my first bike, my first roller skates, and enrolled me in Hebrew school and took me to the movies. They wanted to adopt me but I remembered what my brother Jean had told me during the war, and I refused to change my name.

## **VI. School**

I had never had a chance to go to school in Europe but I had managed to learn how to read and write while in hiding. At first I was sent to the Jewish Peretz School. There were no ESL(English as a Second Language) classes at the time. I only lasted one week at that school because the teacher spoke Yiddish, not French or German. I didn't think that I was going to learn anything at that school and I was in such a hurry to learn.

Mr. Satanov took me to Maple Grove School in Kerrisdale, where I was very fortunate to have a teacher named Miss Mowatt who gave me a small French-English dictionary. I'll never forget it. She's the one who gave me a love for literature and music. She took the time and did a lot for me when I most needed it. She also suggested that I change my name from Mariette to Marie in order to be more Canadian. She understood that I needed to hide who I was. She was a great teacher. I attended Hebrew school after school hours.

I decided to excel in whatever I was doing. I went to Point Grey High School and I won every award that was around in sports and music. I decided my accent didn't make a difference in sports and music. I even got the lead part in a school play. I did thirteen grades in seven and a half years. I found all the Jewish refugees were excluded by the other children. It was a very bad time for me there. Canadians were not as accepting of newcomers then, as they are today.

When I left high school I went to a business school. I took secretarial courses and trained to become a dental nurse. After I got married I worked with my husband who was a furrier, who later went into the building business.

## **VII. A New Life**

When I was fifteen, I met my husband at Hillel, an organization for Jewish students at the University of British Columbia.. We were married when I was nineteen. Today I have three daughters and seven grandchildren. I probably could have achieved more if I had gone back to school but I wanted to get married and have children. I wanted to make my own little nest. I've never stopped educating myself.

I decided to lose my accent when I was refused a job that I wanted at the telephone company. It took a few years of practice and hard work to lose my accent. In the meantime I joined some Jewish organizations and became very involved in community work. Over the years I've been the president of many organizations in the community. I always felt that I had to give something back, because of how good Canada has been to me.

I became Marie here in Canada. The person you see today is someone I created. When I speak about my experiences as a child in the Holocaust, I become Mariette again.

I am a completely different person now. None of us, who came to Canada as orphans, had a chance to be children. As Marie I feel that I've accomplished a lot and I'm proud of who I am and what I've done. As Mariette I feel cheated. That is the only way I can explain it.

Canada is a great country. Today it is a much more tolerant country than it was when I first got here. It is wonderful that so many different people can live together in this country. All people are the same. They want freedom and opportunities for their children.

I think that if children could visit different temples, churches and synagogues, they would see that all people are the same. That is what I taught my children and my grandchildren.

## **Credits**

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